Ryan Padraig Kelly

Marcus Lee had twenty-seven dollars in his checking account and a sticky note on his fridge that read, “Succeed or starve.” He wasn’t dramatic by nature. The sticky note was practical. Inspirational, even. He had written it after watching a free webinar called *Unleash the Inner Giant Within You*, hosted by Bryce Chandler, America’s favorite millionaire-turned-messianic-life-coach—a man who looked like a cross between an energy drink and a televangelist caught mid-exorcism.

Marcus had signed up for a $299 seminar that promised to awaken his potential and maybe also whatever slept behind his eyeballs. He paid for it by borrowing from a guy he knew who still used burner phones and referred to ramen as “freedom noodles.”

Marcus didn’t expect salvation. He expected a plan. A graph. A ten-step program that smelled vaguely of cinnamon and collapsed under scrutiny.

But something strange happened after the confirmation email. Instead of the welcome packet and Zoom link, he got a schedule titled

Speaker Certification Intensive, Tier Two.

At first, Marcus thought maybe this was part of the experience. Like, *whoa, they're onboarding me into success already*. He felt a buzz. A certainty. He printed the itinerary, packed his best polo, and took the Greyhound to a Holiday Inn conference center outside Cleveland.

The sign on the door read:

BECOME THE NEXT BRYCE CHANDLER

Below it:

Turn Your Pain Into Profits™

Marcus hesitated. Was this… the wrong room? Was he supposed to be in the audience?

But the greeter, a too-happy woman named Trixie with blinding veneers and the caffeinated energy of someone who hadn’t blinked since Tuesday, clapped him on the back and handed him a name badge.

“You made it! Speaker candidates to the left, observers to the right!”

Marcus drifted left. Mostly because Trixie looked like she’d tase him if he hesitated.

Day One: Branding the Pain

The first thing they did was break everyone into small groups to “discover your trauma niche.” Apparently, the key to success wasn’t success. It was pain. The more specific, the better. Marcus felt like he was auditioning for an emotionally abusive talent show.

“What’d you go through?” asked a wiry man with Bluetooth earbuds and an unsettling smile. His name tag read: *Tyrone - Platinum Tier*.

“Warehouse work, laid off. Grew up broke. Still broke,” Marcus said.

Tyrone nodded approvingly. “Perfect. That’s *blue-collar burnout*. Real hot right now. People love a

comeback. You just need a catchphrase. Something spiritual but merchandisable."

Marcus blinked.

A woman with glitter eyebrows and a Gucci knockoff chimed in. "Mine's *You can't spell redemption without debt*."

The room applauded like she had solved climate change.

Someone handed Marcus a worksheet titled *Pain to Pitch Pipeline* and a mini bottle of hand sanitizer labeled *Holy Hustle*.

Day Two: The Funnel of Ascension

By now, Marcus had stopped asking questions. He just wrote everything down like a deranged scribe.

The sessions were increasingly absurd:

Tears That Close: Cry on Cue – Align Your Chakras and Your Revenue Streams

The Upsell Gospel: Turning Testimonials Into Tithes

Pose Like a Prophet: Mastering the Messiah Stance for Posters and Book Covers

They practiced mimicking Bryce Chandler’s signature laugh, which

sounded like someone exorcising a credit score.

“You have to *feel* it,” said Coach Janelle, who once sold 14,000 copies of her ebook *Grind Your Grief into Gold* from a prison cell that she later claimed was metaphorical, although a quick Google search suggested otherwise.

“Feel what?” Marcus asked.

She leaned in, eyes wild. Her breath smelled like sage and vape-juice mango.

“The pain of others... as your opportunity.”

Marcus scribbled: *pain = cha-ching? Also, maybe vomit?*

Day Three: Anointed to Close

Marcus had started giving mock speeches. They filmed him on a stage with a backdrop that said *Pain is the Pathway to Profitability* and a faux stained-glass window featuring Bryce Chandler holding a golden microphone like he was auditioning to play Jesus in a Vegas musical.

He delivered lines he had scribbled on a napkin:

“I used to work in a warehouse. I stacked boxes. Now I stack *blessings*.”

The crowd of fellow trainees erupted.

He tried another:

“You don't need a degree. You need *divine drive*.”

A man named Carl wept so loudly a medic had to be called. It turned out to be a performance — Carl was part of the *Tactical Testimony* track. Also, Carl was allergic to sincerity.

They gave Marcus a standing ovation.

Trixie pulled him aside afterward, gripping a clipboard like it owed her money.

“You're a natural. You know we have a *franchise mentorship tier*, right? We license you as an official *Chandler Disciple*. You get the script, the visuals, even the tears algorithm. $15,000 buy-in. But with the way you're pitching? You’ll make that back *easy*.”

Marcus didn’t have fifteen thousand dollars. But he had a thought: *What if I just do the thing... without paying for the thing?*

So, he did.

The Rise of Marcus “AbsoluteLee”

He uploaded videos of himself yelling affirmations into a hairdryer. He launched a Squarespace site with 43 grammatical errors and a donation button labeled *Anoint Me*.

He rebranded himself as *AbsoluteLee*—a name that sounded like it had emerged from a fever dream in a self-help sauna. Every sentence he spoke ended with his own name like it was punctuation forged in delusion.

His videos escalated quickly. In one, he shouted at a woman quietly describing her autoimmune disorder in a comment under his

livestream: “Can you DECIDE you’re going to beat this thing?!”

She typed back, “Well, it’s chronic, so—”

“Absolutely! AbsoluteLee!” he yelled at the camera, finger-pointing like a man auctioning off miracles. Somewhere in the comments, a fire emoji streaked by. The woman didn’t respond again.

His first talk was to a local chamber of commerce where he told three restaurant owners to “stop seasoning fear into their legacy.” One of them asked if that was a tax tip. The second was to a room full

of multi-level marketing casualties who had come expecting therapy and left with fridge magnets that read *Hustle or Die Trying*. His third was a megachurch with more fog machines than functioning exits, where he was introduced as a “certified prosperity architect” and someone shouted “Preach!” before he even spoke.

He kept coming back to the same mantras: “Turn your trial into traction,” “The only poverty is the poverty of mindset,” and “Don’t chase checks. Chase clarity.”

People cheered. Sobbed. Paid.

He sold courses like *Millionaire Mindset with Microwave Meals* and a subscription box called *Bless Up Crate*, which included scented candles, fake testimonials, and a signed photo of him looking tearfully at a brick wall named “Resilience.”

He made motivational TikToks where he screamed *“DESTINY DOESN’T DOUBT YOU”* while eating raw eggs in slow motion.

Within six months, Marcus was clearing $20,000 a week and sleeping three hours a night, mostly upside down “to improve mindset circulation.”

The Email

It came from Bryce Chandler Global, LLC:

Subject: *Unauthorized Use of Licensed Content*

Dear Mr. Lee,

It has come to our attention that you have been using protected motivational material and branded techniques developed by Mr. Bryce Chandler without proper certification or affiliation. Cease and desist immediately or face legal action.

Marcus replied:

Dear Bryce,

Your tear cue module is garbage.

Cheers,

AbsoluteLee™ — trademark pending, obviously.

The Reckoning

It wasn’t Bryce who came for him.

It was Candace.

A single mother from Indiana who had spent her last child support check on Marcus’s *Break the Chains* seminar, which came with a lanyard, a PDF, and a lukewarm buffet of vegan chicken nuggets.

She cornered him in the parking lot outside a strip mall yoga studio with the sort of composure that

precedes violence, standing next to her dented Honda with the engine still running and a toddler asleep in the back seat.

“I told you I was drowning in bills. My rent was three months late. I had to cancel my kid’s dentist appointment so I could afford your weekend intensive. You looked me dead in the eye and said: *‘Pain is just a mindset parasite! Can you decide you're going to beat this thing?! AbsoluteLee!’”*

Marcus stared at her. She looked like the girl from the warehouse who used to bring cookies for everyone's birthdays.

“I knew it was bullshit. I just didn’t expect it to work so well. The lies weren’t the worst part — it was how much people needed them to be true.”

She shook her head. “You just put glitter on the guillotine.”

The Final Keynote

He was scheduled to speak at *EmpowerCon 2025*, sandwiched between a keto messiah and a VR shaman whose goggles had malfunctioned the night before, causing him to perform an exorcism on a potted plant.

Marcus stepped onto the stage.

Thousands of people. Hungry eyes. Desperate notebooks.

He took a breath.

“I came here to sell you a lie. Not because I wanted to. Because it worked.”

Gasps. Some applause. A nervous cough.

“They told me to weaponize my struggle. So, I did. But the truth is, there’s no formula. No secret sauce. Just us, surviving capitalism with vision boards and trauma merch.”

The room froze.

“You don’t need a guru. You need hazard pay. You don’t need a mindset shift. You need a union rep.”

The mic cut. The lights dimmed. Security whispered into radios.

Somewhere in the back, Trixie began twitching like a dying Roomba.

Marcus smiled.

Epilogue

The lawsuits came. One involved a man who claimed Marcus’s affirmation video convinced him to deadlift his cousin’s motorcycle

and now he has three hernias and a GoFundMe.

The income vanished. The Squarespace site became a Russian poker ad. The subscription box turned into a subscription threat.

Bryce Chandler called him a “virus with veneers.”

Marcus returned to warehouse work. Minimum wage, maximum irony.

But sometimes, people would show up. Not with wallets.

With questions. With notebooks. With shaky hope.

And Marcus listened.

Not for applause. Not for tears.

Just because someone had to.

And that, somehow, was enough.
Sort of.